Bitter Contras recall days of hope and U.S. support

STAT

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times A-1
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 17 Oct '88

First in a series

By Glenn Garvin
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

William Casey wobbles slightly as he climbs onto the reviewing stand in a Honduran meadow, just a few miles from the border with Nicaragua. At 73 he is not as sure-footed as he once was in climbing ladders, but his voice is strong. Listening attentively are several hundred Nicaraguan rebels who, in a few weeks, their pockets bulging with new bullets and hand grenades from the United States, will cross the border to try again to topple their country's Marxist government.

To them, the man on the ladder is the second most powerful in the world — after Ronald Reagan, of course — and he must have an important message.

Mr. Casey does not disappoint them. "It's a great privilege for me and my country and President Reagan to stand side by side with you in this struggle," he assures them. "I can assure you that this commitment is a solid one from the president and the Congress of the United States — and from the people."

The troops are silent while the words are translated into Spanish. And then — a roar! The master spy and his president are committed.

●●●

Click. Enrique Bermudez snaps off his video recorder, and the image of the late CIA director fades to a pinpoint. Elsa Bermudez looks over at her husband, the top resistance military man. "I love to watch that tape, Ricky," she says softly. "We were winning then."

●●●

It has never looked so good again. The Casey visit to the resistance camp was taped on Nov. 19, 1986. Within a week, the so-called "Iran-Contra" scandal broke, sucking the Reagan administration into a vortex from which it would never really emerge; within six months, Mr. Casey would be dead of brain cancer.

The fate of the resistance was less precipitous but just as certain. It went on to enjoy its best year in the field, banishing the Sandinista air force from the skies, wrecking the country's electrical power grid and pushing Nicaragua's economy to near collapse.

Fifteen months later, however, its leaders and men discovered that their commitment from the United States was as ephemeral as the electrons that made up Mr. Casey's television image.

The Iran-Contra scandal sharpened what already was a thoroughly polarized issue, and what began as a foreign policy issue quickly dissolved into partisan confrontation. The result: A Democratic-controlled Congress refused to vote further military aid, and, inch by inch, the rebels began backing out of the Nicaraguan jungles toward Honduras. Today, fewer than 2,000 remain inside Nicaragua, down from a high of 15,000.

"They're deader than a doornail," says one U.S. official who has served in Central America.

The military aid cutoff, which took effect last February, was the latest step in a peculiar and intermittent dance between the Nicaraguan resistance and the U.S. government that has been going on since November 1980, when a small group of the rebels spoke with members of the incoming Reagan administration about their dream of destroying the Marxist-Leninist government that had been ruling their country for the past year.

At first, the group was composed almost totally of former members of the Nicaraguan National Guard, the army that was enforcer for the family of dictator Anastasio Somoza until it was toppled in 1979. Later — as the political bent of the Sandinistas became clearer, and American dollars grew more plentiful — the tiny core of Guardsmen would be swelled by thousands of angry peasants and disillusioned former Sandinistas.

And what a strange dance they were to have with the gringos. Sometimes the American aid has been covert, sometimes overt, and sometimes through proxies. Sometimes it has been administered by the CIA, sometimes by the State Department, and sometimes through government agencies that specialize in refugee care. Sometimes it has included bullets, and sometimes there have been only beans and Band-Aids.

Eight years later, the rebels are weary of the minuet, but they have no other partner. "I call it the 'uncertainty policy,' " says one longtime resistance leader. "Sometimes the gringos are with us, sometimes not. . . ."

All the pauses and permutations in American aid over the years — and the scare stories that accompanied each one — make it chancy to declare the resistance dead. And certainly there are those who believe the rebels can still play an important role in Nicaragua, even without American help.

But along with the imminent departure of President Reagan, the rebels' biggest champion, there are differences, more foreboding and seemingly final for the resistance, about this cutoff.

The biggest is the stream of refugees it has created. During the last few months, a steady trickle of Nicaraguans — many of them rebel soldiers who have sold their weapons to finance the long walk north — has moved across the U.S. border near Brownsville, Texas. Any morning of the week, just across the border in Matamoros, Mexico, dozens of Nicaraguans huddle at the bus station or in the lobby of the Hotel Fiesta Gallo, bargaining with "coyotes" — guides who, for a price, will arrange passage into Texas.

American immigration authorities say they have caught 1,500 Nicaraguans along the border this year; many times that number, they say, have gotten away.

Some of the former fighters who have crossed the border say that police and immigration officials in Central America actually helped them on their way north. Humberto Galeano, an 18-year-old rebel veteran who arrived here in May, said a Honduran policeman bought his pistol for $50 when he explained he wanted to go to the United States.

Most of the resistance soldiers, to

CONTINUED
Page 3

United States — at least, not yet. Instead, they wait patiently in their base camps in Honduras, believing American help will soon resume.

"I'm surprised that their morale is so high with what they've been going through," says John K. Singlaub, a retired U.S. army general who raises funds for the rebels and is a frequent visitor to their camps. "They listen to the Managua radio, and they hear about all the great Sandinista [political and diplomatic] victories. But very few of them are saying, 'That's it, let's get a green card and go to the States.' "

A March 23 agreement negotiated with Managua might have helped keep rebel units armed and inside Nicaragua. It called for them to withdraw into designated cease-fire zones, where they could receive airdrops of humanitarian aid. No agreement was ever reached on the precise location of the cease-fire zones, however.

Humanitarian aid has been delivered in Honduras, where it acts as a magnet, drawing troops away from the battlefield.

As the resistance units edge out of Honduras, many of them bring their civilian supporters out too. The result: Some 11,000 rebel troops and more than 20,000 of their civilian relatives and supporters holed up in primitive camps scattered across southern Honduras, many suffering from malnutrition, malaria, pneumonia, tuberculosis and acute bronchitis.

Since February, organized rebel forces have been living on $44.7 million in non-lethal supplies from the United States. But — as has often happened in the past — the surviving assistance program is hopelessly snarled in red tape and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

The program is being run by the Agency for International Development, an agency more accustomed to building schoolhouses and medical clinics than to acting as quartermaster to a guerrilla army.

The blame does not all lie with the agency, however. The Honduran government does not want to make life too pleasant in the rebel camps, fearing the rebels will get the idea that they are welcome to stay. As early as January 1987, Honduran President Jose Azcona voiced the suspicion that the United States would cut off military aid to the resistance and leave him with 15,000 or so armed men with whom to contend, and this month he proposed a United Nations force to expel all foreign soldiers from Honduran territory.

But while others debate whether the rebels will burden Honduras as vicious bandits or destitute refugees, the rebels themselves say it is people in Texas who ought to be concerned. "There are 100,000 fighters and relatives altogether," says one rebel. "No way is Honduras going to take them. No way the governments of Central America are going to take them. If the U.S. government doesn't set up a program, then they'll walk to the United States. And the Central American governments will help them."

Such bitterness mirrors the frustration that has grown steadily over the years. The rebels say they have been crippled by restrictions, by micro-management from gringos who didn't understand their struggle, and most of all by inconsistent support from a nation that did not want to get its own hands dirty but insisted on giving lectures to those who would. One movement sympathizer calls it a "Bay of Pigs in slow motion."

Many U.S. officials, on the other hand, say resistance leaders have spent too much time haggling, have neglected their public image and have been slow to learn the lessons of guerrilla warfare. "Talk about children in need of adult supervision!" sighs one exasperated American official.

Whatever the merits of the recriminations, the alliance now may be over for good. Most rebel leaders do not expect U.S. aid to resume anytime soon. They are waiting out the November presidential elections, to see if a George Bush administration will make one last shot at Congress.

But mostly they calculate how many of their men will fight on alone.

• *Research assistant Michael Cromwell contributed to this report.*

Tomorrow: It began as a "crazy idea."

THE FACES OF WAR

Nicaragua's civil war has been a wild pastiche of bullets and rhetoric; and there have been as many battles in Washington offices as in the jungle. Here are some of the warriors — not all of whom carry guns.

RONALD REAGAN: It wouldn't be necessary to overthrow the Sandinistas "if the present government would turn around and say . . . 'uncle.' "

DANIEL ORTEGA, president of Nicaragua: "Let me tell you something: What I really would like to be doing is what Che did — not to have stayed in Nicaragua after the triumph, but rather, to have gone on to other lands to struggle....But we have a reality here — the ongoing confrontation — and we've been confronting it for six years."

WILLIAM CASEY, CIA director: "We rejoice today that we can join actively in the fight. I can assure you that this commitment is a solid one from the president and the Congress of the United States — and from the people."

ADOLFO CALERO, a resistance leader since the earliest days: "We should have been more demanding of the United States — we should have demanded more of our allies. We should have put things more strongly to them. And we should have been prepared to stop the thing if we didn't get what we wanted."

ENRIQUE BERMUDEZ, from the beginning the top rebel military man: "If I am not a good commander, where are the good ones? Let's judge by the results. I made the forces, 17,000 combatants who have made life hell for the Sandinistas."

EDEN PASTORA, charismatic Sandinista commander who deserted to the resistance: He once sneaked into the U.S. ambassador's residence in Costa Rica, disguised with a wig, a false hook nose and a pair of fake glasses, for breakfast. He complained that the Costa Rican government was seizing his military equipment. "It's your own damn fault," snapped the ambassador. "You're sloppy and careless."

ALFREDO CESAR, who joined the resistance leadership with strong U.S. backing: Conservative rebels deride him as someone with no political experience inside Nicaragua. He agrees: "I've never been a part of a pre-revolutionary political institution, thank God. I identify myself with the hopes and political aspirations of the 80 percent of Nicaraguans who are less than 40. I identify myself with the future."

ARTURO CRUZ JR., an adviser first to the Sandinistas and later to the rebels: He laughs at allegations that the U.S. encouraged the rebels to commit atrocities. "Historically, if you look at the way that Augusto Sandino behaved in the field, it was an extraordinary event — I mean, cutting tongues, cutting legs and arms off...We don't need the United States to teach us to be savages."